John Elliott Interview

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Interview by Daniel Golodner

A: I'm John Elliott, retired president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, and teacher.

I was born on June 30th, 1931 in Raleigh, West Virginia, which is a coal-mining town and where I spent my early years. My father was... I'm not sure that he was a coal miner. If he was, it wasn't very long, because at the time he died he was a janitor, a school janitor. But the rest of my male relatives were coal miners. And, well, that was virtually the only job in West Virginia at that time. I guess, a few clerks at the company store. And by the way, everything in the community that we lived in, and some of the surrounding communities, were owned by the coalmines. If you've heard that Johnny Cash song, "I owe my soul to the company store," well, it was a truism. It *is* a truism. I don't know if it's still true or not, but in those days, well, it was kind of like today's credit card. You would go to the company store, and you would get what you want;

you would sign something, and they'd take it out of your paycheck.

(telephone ringing)

Q: So, we were talking about your family as coal miners, and the company store.

A: Well the company store was a truism -- I don't know if it still is or not, because I haven't been down that way in, well, God knows how long. But you could go in, and it didn't matter, as long as they knew you. And in those small towns in West Virginia, everybody knew everybody. So if you went to the company store, the clerks behind the counter knew you, whether you were a kid or an adult. Basically, all you had to do was tell them what you wanted, sign -- I guess -- some kind of paper saying, "I bought two Tootsie Rolls for two cents." That kind of stuff. So that was that kind of life. The kids went to school, because that was the law, and as soon as they were old enough they would quit and go to the coal mine.

My brother and I were born just before World War II. So after my father died, my mother, had to work -- and she did work, doing repair work on clothing at a dry cleaner's. She came up here because that's what most of the folks down there did during the early years of World War II. They

came up here because apparently there were better jobs, that paid more than the coalmines, (laughter) certainly it was a lot cleaner, too. It was one of those jobs where you took a bath every day.

Q: So, your family moved here right before World War II, or during...

A: at some point during; I don't really know. '40... probably somewhere around '42. Maybe '43, but...

Q: And where did your mom work?

A: When she got here, she got another job in a dry-cleaning shop. Same thing. In fact, as I got older, I worked there for a short time pressing the tops of pants. *There* was a career for you! (laughter) And I also had a paper route, and working in supermarkets. They were not anything like they are today. A lot less product, and it was mainly A&P. There were two chains, A&P and... I guess Kroger's was still a fairly active organization then. Of course, now A&P has changed completely. So anyway, I worked at A&P. That's how I got through college, in fact, with my...

Q: Where did you live in Detroit?

A: On the East Side, initially. I guess you'd call it the entry point for black folks who came to Detroit from wherever they came from -- mainly the South. But there was essentially a black community in Detroit at that time. If

there was any other black communities in Detroit, I didn't know about them, but most of us who came up here -- well, we lived there because it was a black community. Two, that's where our relatives -- because most of us came up...

Q: Is this what they called Black Bottom?

A: Black Bottom, that's it! It's just outside of downtown Detroit now. If you need a landmark, it was near the Silver Cup Bread Factory, which is not far. I went to, let's see, I went to Duffield Elementary. And then it was a combined middle and high school. Is that Miller? I think it was Miller Middle/High School. But we didn't stay at that area too long. My mother bought a house, out... not too far from here, but on Davidson, near 12th Street. She bought a house there, and we stayed there for a -- well, actually, there through high school and all that good stuff. It was probably one of the earliest integrated neighborhoods in Detroit -- because it was -- but, of course, that changed in time.

I graduated from Central High School, got a job, decided I wanted to go to college, and did. I started out at the Lawrence -- I think it was the Detroit Business School. Or was it Lawrence Tech? I think it was the Lawrence Institute of Technology, which in those days was on

Woodward Avenue, near the railroad tracks, just about a half-mile from Davidson. It was a former Ford Motor Companies headquarters for a while. In fact, that big old Ford plant was back behind it. And across the street from a Sears store. Both of which are no longer there. Sears moved out to Oakland mall. That's where I started college.

But I -- well, I just wasn't making it at Lawrence Tech. They were... Well, let's say I was not a natural mathematician. In those days, if you went to Lawrence Tech, you were going to be an engineer, and they made -- *the* emphasis was on math. You took it all! You got your basic math, if you hadn't done enough in school, the regular grades. And then you would get into algebra, geometry, analytic geometry, chemistry... You name it, you took it. And it involved lots of math. Well, I had to cut that loose. And then I went and wound up at Wayne State University, where I decided I was going to be a teacher. And I did OK there! (laughter)

Q: Not bad! (laughter)

A: Yeah. (laughter) Anyway, I graduated from Wayne State. It was nothing like it is now. I don't know if you know Wayne State, but it's got humongous buildings all over the

place, and air conditioning, and all of that good stuff. Well, it wasn't like that in my day. (laughter)

Q: What was it like in the early -- this is the early '60s, late '50s, right?

A: Late '50s, yeah.

Q: So what was Wayne State like then?

A: Oh, just a few buildings, some of them used buildings, or former office buildings, or something like that. But it was just a small college; that's all you could say about it. It was growing, because it was a state institution, but it was small. Very few blacks went to college, mainly because they had to go to work, but I did. Let's see, I was drafted into the Army early in World War II, and I was overseas for a hot minute, but nothing major.

Q: This is Korea?

A: Korea, right. But I didn't see any action or anything. I often wondered why the hell was it we were over there. (laughter)

Q: And when you come back -- did you go to school with the G.I. Bill?

A: Yes. That was my next point I went to school -- came back on the G.I. Bill, which probably got me through; I'm not sure I could have made it. Because when I came back I returned to working at A&P, and between A&P and the G.I.

Bill I got through college. And I don't think I could have made it without the G.I. Bill, because -- relatively speaking -- college was expensive in those days, or maybe folks like us just didn't earn the kind of income that you had to pay for tuition. But it weren't cheap. At least, I don't remember it as being that. I graduated from the Wayne State College of Education. And I don't remember the year, but I can find it.

Q: It was '61.

A: '61. I graduated, and I started teaching at the school where I had done my student teaching, and that was Hutchins. Was it a junior high school? I think it was Hutchins Junior High School in those days, which is over not too far from the current DFT office.

Q: What was teaching like, in your first month or so?

A: Well, it's hard to say. First of all, I worked at an all-black school, one of the few that the city had at that time -- because there weren't that many blacks. (laughter) I mentioned Miller before, and Hutchins was just turning the point on integration. So I thought, "Well, Hell," you know, "I ought to go to an all-black school and teach." And I did. And they wanted blacks to go to all-black schools.

I went, and it was tough. Without sounding unkind, the students were mainly little hoodlums. So I ruled my classroom with a paddle. And that was it. And there was not the anti-corporal punishment sentiment that you have today, or at least not in that neighborhood. I think I was successful. But at least I had order in my classroom, which was more than some of the teachers could say. Especially the new ones, but even some of the experienced ones. Well, the kids were little hellions.

Q: Did you have communication with the parents, about the --

A: Hmm?

Q: Did you have communication with the parents?

A: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, it's -- if I had trouble with a kid, I would contact the parents. Most of the parents, I'm sure, didn't have telephones in those days. Too poor. But I would contact the parents, if there was a problem with the kid, they would come to the school and find out what it was -- and they were definitely *not* opposed to corporal punishment. You know? They were, "Good, good!"

I taught at Hutchins for -- I think it was three or four years. The rule at Wayne State, where I was -- no, the school system rule was, when you were a probationary

teacher, you taught for a couple of years and then you were automatically transferred to a school with a different community and background. So they transferred me from Hutchins, it was virtually an all-black school in a nearly all-black community. Not too far from the DFT office, which is on Grand Boulevard and the freeway. It was just -- maybe a mile from there.

I transferred to a school out this way, the Hampton Middle School -- Junior High School; they called them junior high schools in those days. At Hampton, it *was* all-white -- they were taking one or two black kids -- and mainly Jewish. At Hampton, on a Jewish holiday, you could walk out in the halls and count the kids who were there. They observed the holidays. That's all you can say about it.

Q: I'm sorry, what was the difference in teaching, from Hutchins to Hampton?

A: A world of difference. I mean, say what you want, the Jewish kids -- well, if they didn't want to learn, they had to learn, and they did. And I think they wanted to learn, because that was just part of the family tradition. And my guesstimate is that they all -- *virtually* all of them went to college when they graduated from high school. And the local high school that they went to was either Central or

Northern. Mainly Northern, for that neighborhood. And so -- wait a minute, what am I saying? That was Hutchins. Hutchins was Central or Northern. And then they transferred me out to Hampton, which is not far from here. It's up near Livernois and Seven Mile. Now, that was -- that *was* an all-Jewish school, and that's the one where there was just nobody but us in the hallways on a Jewish holiday. So I finished my junior high school days at Hampton, and... where did I go then? Well, I was supposed to go to Mumford, which is not far from here either. For some reason, I don't think I did. Where the hell *did* I go?

Q: Cooley?

A: No I taught at Cooley. Anyway, I -- maybe it was just Central. Anyway, I graduated from high school, thought, "Well, hell, I guess I'll go to college," tried it... I started out in some business school in Highland Park -Tech Business School? -- whatever. That -- no, Lawrence -- was it Lawrence Tech? Anyway, I wound up getting drafted into the Army.

Q: You were drafted?

A: Mm-hmm, oh yeah. This was during the Korean War. Was it Korea? One of those wars. (laughter) I got drafted into the Army. They sent us down to Fort Knox for basic training. For some reason -- I still don't remember, other

than, I guess, it was the glamour of it -- I decided that I wanted to be a paratrooper. I went down to Fort Benning, Georgia, for airborne training. From Fort Benning, they sent me to -- no, I was stationed at Fort Benning for a while, in an airborne regiment. A little while after that, I was transferred to the 82nd Airborne Division, which was in North Carolina, South Carolina? Oh God, (laughter) my memory's horrible. I think it was North Carolina. It was Fort Bragg. And Fort Bragg -- the 82nd Airborne Division was actually the... what would you say? The protector, or the safety division, for Washington, D.C. In other words, if something happened in Washington, D.C. -- like, well, the race riots -- then the 82nd Airborne Division, which transferred to someplace outside of Washington -- to ensure the safety of the federal government. Now, we were told that; it was not just a rumor or something somebody made up. So we were the security guard, and marched in the Presidential parade, and all of that good stuff.

Well after I got out of the military -- two years; I did not re-up -- I went, came back to college -- Wayne State, -- and got my degree in teaching. When I got my degree I asked to be assigned to Hutchins, I was, and again, you only worked there for -- when you were a probationary

teacher -- I know I said this earlier -- you only worked in your first school a few years. Two years was the official rule, but because I was a good teacher and had good classroom control and stuff, and one of the few black teachers at the time, the principal asked that I be left there. And I stayed at least another two years, before I came out to Hampton.

Q: Did you join the Detroit Federation of Teachers while you were a probationary teacher?

A: Oh, yeah. I joined the DFT early on. In fact, I was one of those who was active in the campaign to get union representation for teachers. We didn't have union representation in those days. And we had -- our opposition was the Michigan Education Association, which was *the* teacher union -- they didn't use the word "union"; that was a dirty word.

Q: They were still an "association."

A: Yeah, right. They were a "professional" union.

Q: But you knew you wanted to join the DFT.

A: Well, West Virginia was a union community, and to me, a union was the best. If you lived and worked in West Virginia, and you worked in the coalmines, you belonged to the union. There was no two ways about it. So I joined the DFT. In fact, I was active in the DFT in the early to

middle '60s, doing what, you know, first-timers always do. And in those days -- when I first got active, the teachers didn't have union representation. And we worked at it -- we still took grievances, or handled grievances, and we had -- I guess, for that day -- a liberal superintendent. Or at least he was tolerant. (laughter) I think that was Brownell, Sam Brownell.

Q: Brownhal?

A: Brownell, B-R-O-W-N-E-L-L. He was a bastard, but he had his good points, and he would listen to the teachers and stuff like that. He was one of the first -- he was one of the few superintendents who ruled the Board of Education. You know, it probably differs from city to city, but in some cases the Board of Education is the last word on anything. Well, in Detroit, Brownell was the last word. And he left here and went someplace -- maybe New York, but I don't remember. And we had a string of superintendents, some mediocre, some less than mediocre.

But by that time the DFT had gotten -- oh, first, we got a law passed -- authorizing collective bargaining for teachers in the state. That was a tough job, largely because -- well, even in those days, Michigan was Republican. And you might have collective bargaining for

autoworkers and retail clerks but, it was considered a sin for a teacher to be in a union. So we finally got it, after we got legislation passed authorizing public-employee unionization -- because it wasn't just teachers that wanted to unionize, but all public employees wanted a collective-bargaining representative.

Q: So, you and the DFT, as well as AFSCME, and others --

A: Yeah, absolutely. We had good backing from the UAW, which, was the strong union in those days, much stronger than it is now. Because auto factories were all around, and they had unionized the auto factories to the *n*th degree. With the assistance -- and I do mean financial, as well as personnel -- we finally got public-employee unions. Which were authorized by the state. And we started to bargain. We got a contract. I'm not sure whether we were the first union to get a contract or not, because, the MEA was pretty powerful outside of Detroit. So they may have gotten a contract or two in some places ahead of us, but Detroit was the big thing. Hell...

Q: Can we go back to the election?

A: Yeah.

Q: Why don't you explain how that process happened? That you had to have an election to be representative, then you fought off the MEA...

A: Oh, yeah, sure. Well, basically, we had to get legislation creating a union. And part of that legislation, I'm virtually sure, you had to have an election by the teachers -- or the public employees; let's just say teachers. There had to be an election of the teachers. And again, our primary opposition was the Michigan Education Association. And let's face it, Detroit was a prize. I don't know how many employees Detroit had then; more than ten thousand, I'm sure. And we grew some after that, so I may be getting my numbers mixed up. But Detroit was much bigger than it is now, because there was nothing on the other side of Eight Mile Road! Really, this house was built in, what, '42? Something like that. And Mumford High School, which is just a little ways up, was just starting to fill up with the Jewish students who were moving out of the "core," or central city. So, anyway, we were elected over the MEA as collective bargaining representatives.

Q: Then you had to sit down and hammer out a contract.

A: Yeah.

Q: Was it a basic contract? Was it a simple...?

A: A very simple -- the first one, I'm sure, was a very simple one. As you would expect, you know? We had the right to represent the members with grievances -- in fact, the members had the right to file a grievance, which they

didn't have before. And we could take a principal to -- well, in those days, the School Board -- arbitration.

Which was, I think, a real prize in those days, because -- hell, the school board was more than likely going to support the principal anyway. Some of them were fair; I don't want to say they were all unfair. But the principal had an edge going in. But we did eventually get the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) to hear -- we had to write to appeal to the Michigan Employment Relations Commission on grievances, and on contract settlement if the two parties just weren't getting together. So, I would say we took good advantage of it. And in those days -- I don't think we do that now -- we always had a lawyer when we went to MERC, who would -- I guess you'd call it a semi-couriering -- but we had a lawyer, which was Theodore Sachs, Ted Sachs, who unfortunately is no longer there, although the union still uses his law firm. Ted was just -- he was a gem. That's all I can say. He didn't only represent the DFT, but he represented other unions as well. And, well, between Ted -- our expertise as we gained it -- we got to be pretty good. Obviously, one of the leading teacher unions in the

state. We struck about three times, I think, during the 60s.

Q: OK, why don't we talk about the first strike -- 1967, I believe it was?

A: Sounds about right.

Q: And do you remember what the issues were?

A: (laughter) The usual. Pay, bargaining rights, grievance settlements. You know, the very --just the beginning, basic stuff, as I suspect almost every union that's just getting off the ground -- let's say we had to establish ourselves. And always looking over our shoulder was the Michigan Education Association.

Q: Were they still challenging the DFT with elections?

A: Oh, yeah. Let's see, they challenged us -- well, in '67. And they came back, and the -- I think it was the second time -- the challenge was headed by a former DFT member who'd run against me, Tom Cook. I don't know how, or what, but Tom somehow-or-other got involved with the MEA, and they filed, for collective -- I mean, for an election -- a bargaining unit -- and Tom headed it. But as I recall, we beat him rather handily. And then they came back one other time, lost badly, and we got word that they were not ever going to come back. Because, three times, they strike out. (laughter)

We also helped the other employees. Because obviously, for a while there, the teachers were the only ones with bargaining, but we talked to Ruby -- well, I'm not sure whether she was active then -- we helped the clerical workers and... The custodians probably did it on their own, because they were part of the AFL-CIO. And the operating engineers -- well, they were a kingdom all to themselves. When you've got the switch that turns on the heat, and stuff like that, you have a lot to say. So, in a short time, all of the unions had collective bargaining rights. I would just estimate by 1970. Even --

Q: Were the Paras organized?

A: About that time, yeah. I don't remember when federal aid really took off as a major factor in school funding, but the Paras were created as a result of the creation of federal funding for education. Who was that?

Q: Johnson.

A: Johnson, OK, yeah. Anyway, they were created for that.

Q: Was Detroit starting to integrate at this time?

A: Well, it was *dis*integrating, really. It was integrated for a very short period of time. But it was neighborhoods -- for example, when I moved out here in the '40s, oh, I would guess that anywhere from 70 to 90% of this block was white.

Well, that didn't last too long, and they started to jump on the other side of Eight Mile Road, which was created -- the Oak Park, which is directly on the other side, and Royal Oak, and Southfield. It started to *dis*integrate. And it took a while, obviously. But part of it was the -- part of it was because the J.L. Hudson company, which I think is Macy's now, built the Northlands Shopping Center over on James Couzens and Eight Mile, which is a couple miles from here at a minimum. And I think that started the exodus out of the city -- or Hudsons was able to predict that it was going to happen, because they built it on -- right now, on the corner of Eight Mile and James Couzens, which is the freeway out of the city.

This area started to grow -- as did others; Dearborn was around in those days. They -- well, actually, anything on the other side of Eight Mile, or -- oh, Telegraph, whatever it was -- the western edge of the city was just -- there was nothing there but forest, trees, weeds.

It was all forest out there then; what made them move out there, I don't know, other than maybe they'd predicted that was where people were going.

Q: And the schools were being affected by this?

A: What?

Q: The schools were being affected by everybody leaving?

A: Eventually, yes. Yeah. But in communities like Oak Park, first of all -- well, they had to build schools, and they had to make sure that they had a population that would support the schools. But in time, the suburbs just grew. And as the suburbs grew, Detroit started to shrink. I think I saw something in the papers -- yesterday, day before yesterday, something like that -- "Detroit is losing something like 60,000 people a year." So we're still losing population. They all moved out, you have your Ferndale and your Oak Park and your Southfield and whatever is west of Southfield, and it just spread on out, until now you can drive out US-10 -- the extension of the Lodge -- to Brighton, which is 30-something miles outside the city, and don't see anything but buildings and homes and stuff like that.

Whereas, in my day, when I first started going to Lansing -- I was a DFT lobbyist for a while -- when I first started going to Lansing, hell, you hit the other side of Ten Mile and there weren't *nothing* but woods, trees, and forest. In fact, before you got to 10 miles there was a lot of that.

Northland was probably the creator of some of this -- what do you call it? -- northern movement. And anyway, it's grown since then the integration just was no longer here.

Q: Is this -- could this be possibly why the population of Detroit wanted to decentralize the school system?

A: I think that was just one of those phases. That might have been the given reason; I don't remember. I think that was just one of those phases that school systems go through sometimes. You know, we have a central board with people from all -- anybody who wanted to run could run, and it didn't matter where you were from. And then we went through that period where we had districts -- it was a central system, but the system was divided into districts, with their own superintendent. That didn't accomplish anything; it was too damn expensive, because each one of those districts wanted their own administrative staff, who didn't do a damn thing.

Q: How did that affect the union?

A: Only in that we had to handle grievances or district problems with the district superintendent, and then if that didn't work we'd go to the central superintendent. It probably took a little more staff, but it was just one of those administrative things -- to be kind -- that didn't accomplish much, largely because the district

superintendent either didn't give a damn or thought he ruled the world, the world being his district. But we usually got fair treatment from the central administration in those days -- because there was some controversy between the districts and the central.

Q: Now, this brought about the decentralization of Detroit, didn't that spawn the Milliken v Bradley case, about busing in Detroit? Do you remember that?

A: Not specifically. There was busing. Busing, as I recall, was -- usually had something to do with the ability of the district to handle the kids they had. In short -- in the central city, people were moving out, families were moving out here. And some of the schools just didn't have enough kids to handle certain grade levels -- or, as was probably as much the case as anything else, we were going through this bit about integration. And in the central city, it was mainly black, whereas out here -- Mumford High School up here, McDowell Elementary up here -- it was all white. So that was *part* of the busing thing. You couldn't have a city that was -- that had a sizable black population all going to school together, and the whites on the edges all going to school together.

That was a part of the reason for busing. I would imagine, not enough kids for the elementary schools in the central city, and they even combined them. Schools like - Duffield and Miller -- went from elementary schools -- K-6 or K-3 or 3-6 -- to elementary/middle -- K-8 or -9 -- for that reason. But that was expensive, again, because you might not have enough kids, and so then you had to have combined classes, and that don't work worth a damn. You know, you've got a bunch of eighth-graders and ninth-graders in the same classroom -- no, thank you! I was there for that one. Well, you've got to have two different curriculums, or somebody's going to suffer. And usually, the kids just didn't -- oh, let's say the ninth-graders got eighth-grade math, or vice versa. So we went through all of those little phases. And a lot of them are just the school style of the time. Well, I know Hampton, which is just up the street here, again - Livernois and Seven Mile -- it was one of those that had it for a while, and it just didn't work.

It wasn't a problem in the central city, because there weren't -- the whites got out of there in a hurry. But when they got out here, they got established. I was probably the second black on this block, when I moved out here in the '40s. The Clarks, across the street, were the

first. And of course that changed in time. But no, integration was one of the fashionable things of its day.

Q: How was the union handling it?

A: As far as I can remember, we were for it. I have to think... Mary Ellen Riordan was our president. When did Mary Ellen leave office?

Q: She left in '80.

A: Yeah, OK. Well, -- yeah, thanks, (laughter) because I was trying to get it together, and I'm thinking of the '60s, and I know that was wrong. I got involved in the union in the '60s. Not too long after I joined the system, and again. So anyway, I got involved and got on the executive board. Got on the executive board -- got on the staff, eventually.

Q: What year was this, John?

A: Oh, late '60s. I think I've got it on paper somewhere here. Anyway, it was during the '60s, and -- let's see, I became president in what, '88 or something?

Q: '81.

A: '81, president?

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Ooh, boy! OK! (laughter) Anyway... let's see, I ran against Mary Ellen; I think I won. Then a guy named Tom Cook, who was a Mary Ellen supporter, ran against me. He

lost. And if I said it before, forgive me, but... He lost a second time, or so. Somehow he fell in with the MEA and came back and failed again.

Q: Why don't we just go back to when you became part of the executive board. Were you part of the Riordan Team, or...?

A: Oh, yeah. I was part of the Riordan Team from day one. Until, of course, I ran against her. (laughter)

Q: Also, didn't you return back to the classroom in '75?

A: Yeah. When I lost the election, I wasn't going back to the union office! So I had to go back to the classroom. And that basically -- I think when I ran and lost, I went to Cooley High School.

Q: You said you were teaching in early '60s. And then you returned back to teaching in '75. What big differences did you see?

A: I don't know; I cannot tell you. You remember now, I started out in mainly black schools. Cooley was still integrated, and a pretty damn school in that day. So it's kind of hard to say, only because -- like going from Hutchins to Hampton -- it's just two different worlds. And so therefore it's hard to say what it's like, other than Hampton obviously had kids who wanted to learn, who were expected to go to college and did, and so forth, whereas with Hutchins, the family from day one was just involved in

economic survival. You were lucky if you had a factory job, which was guaranteed work. I don't think you can compare schools in a city like this, at any point in time. It depends on the economics of the community, and I don't think you could be -- let's just say it was so different that it was just like having different suburban schools, by income. Well, it's even like that today. I think this area's obviously a different income from down in the central city, and probably the wealthiest community is over on the East Side, near the Grosse Pointes. And probably the best-achieving schools in the city are in that area.

Q: So, you were running against Mary Ellen in 1980, under the UTR -- was that the United Teachers' Rights?

A: Right. Yeah, that was -- those of us who were breaking with the Riordan Team --

Q: Why was there a break with the Riordan Team?

A: Well, I would say offhand now, with hindsight, that, just another group that thought that we can do things better. I'm not sure why even I ran myself, other than, "Hey, I can be president!" And the city was changing. The racial makeup of the teachers was changing. Mary Ellen was either retiring or going to retire, and everybody knew it. So it was just one of those political things. Just like when Tom Cook left -- and I'm not sure why the hell he did leave --

and ran against her. If he had stayed, he'd have been -- he might have been president instead of me.

Q: What was it like becoming president of DFT? What were some of the major changes you wanted to place on the union?

A: I didn't make many changes, to tell you the truth. Staff-wise, I knew the staff, I knew their capabilities. So I kept the staff. That surprised the hell out of a lot of people. Obviously I was President; I put one of my running mates, Carol Thomason, as Executive Vice President, and maybe one other person in as Administrative Assistant. But I knew most of those folks and they knew me. So it wasn't any hostility or antagonism. And hey, a job at a union office is better than teaching school! (laughter) So I kept most of the staff, to the surprise of some, I'm sure. We kind of floated along. I knew most of the top administrators in the School Administrators Building, because of my days on the Riordan Team and negotiating contacts and handling grievances. So my memory is that it was a fairly simple changeover, or change in leadership.

Q: But then you stepped into the 1980s, though, with Reagan economics, freezes on teachers and salaries... So, there was a strike in... 1982?

A: I don't know. (laughter) We had a lot of them.

Q: Do you remember Arthur Jefferson as superintendent?

A: Oh, yeah, Arthur Jefferson. He was a bastard in his own way, but you could talk to him. He would listen. I used to have one-on-one conferences with Art. It may not have been obvious, but usually we got along. And if we could agree on something and agree what we'd say and what our people would do... We could come to an agreement.

Arthur Jefferson was probably as good a superintendent as we had. The worst was David Snead, who was a principal. (laughter) You know, if you've ever worked with principals, there are some principals who can work with people and get along fine, and others who issue orders and expected... (laughter) and expect you to -- bend over -- to -- kiss his ass. Well, that was --

(telephone ringing)

Q: OK. Let's get back. We were just talking about early-'80s Detroit. What was the climate in Detroit during the early to mid '80s?

A: Well, once again, it depends on where you live. I think there was a touch of hostility and anxiety in some neighborhoods, because of the race thing. Of course, the auto industry was starting to shift out of Detroit and Michigan, and that created a job problem. And that always creates hostility among people.

The staff in the schools started to change, because, the white teachers could and would get jobs elsewhere. In fact, up until probably just recently, Ann Arbor would publicly declare they would recruit -- their best recruiting was done here in Detroit. Ann Arbor is the University of Michigan (laughter), if you want to put it that way, but they could get access to experienced teachers, and I guess they could pick and choose who they want.

Q: Yeah, I just read that New York City was even coming here to recruit teachers.

A: I have heard that. I don't know that for a fact, but I know school districts like Ann Arbor, Southfield, Ferndale, would recruit experienced teachers -- they didn't have to hire new teachers. They could get experienced teachers here in Detroit.

Q: So how was that affecting the union? The membership?

A: Well, it didn't affect the union, as I think I said earlier, because if you were an employee you had to join the union. We negotiated that probably back in the '60s.

Q: Agency fee -- '70. 1970.

A: OK. Either that or pay agency shop fee, which was just a few dollars less than the dues. And people soon learned,

or felt, that the union was on their side, so, they signed up for the union. And I kind of suspect the building reps, who were overall pretty loyal union members, convinced them that it was better to be a union member than an agency shopper.

Q: But how did the union try to retain qualified, good teachers from leaving the city?

A: Well, we really weren't active in that, because -- I don't know, we just didn't. Other than -- if we could talk somebody into it, we would. We certainly wouldn't be encouraging people to leave, because -- face it, the people who leave are the best ones, are the good ones, and you're left with the son-of-a-bitches who are always in trouble. And you don't need that. (laughter)

Unions don't need "trouble" people. So we certainly didn't discourage -- I mean, encourage people to leave. But if we could work with the school system to come up with something that would keep people in Detroit, we would do it.

Q: Did you try to start a peer-review plan, like Toledo did in the early '80s?

A: No, I don't think we did. If we did, it was minor in nature. That was more or less the responsibility of the school system. I don't recall that we did.

Q: OK.

Q: Do you remember when the Nation at Risk plan came out?

A: The what?

Q: The Nation at Risk report? Came out? Do you remember when that came out in, '83?

A: I remember the title. And I think -- I seem to recall that it had something to do with big-city schools, and the way the kids in big-city schools, particularly what we call the "inner city," were falling behind.

Q: What I remember is Albert Shanker said that he agreed with the report, where everybody else was against it. And he said, "Because they're not criticizing. They're saying, 'This is how we're going to *help* schools.'" And some people think that was the shift of AFT from a bread-and-butter union to a professional union -- that is --

A: OK, I would agree with that.

Q: -- an education-reform. Did you see any education-reform actions here in Detroit that helped teachers? Or was this other phase and trends?

A: I don't think there was an education reform that actually helped teachers. I think teaching -- except for the curriculum -- you had to teach the kids. I'm convinced that it was more the personality and style of the teacher that helped teachers. If you had a good strong principal who backed up his teachers, that helped a lot. We had

both. But I don't think -- rarely did anything ever come from the School Board or from the central administration that was helpful to teachers.

Q: How were they helpful for the kids, for learning?

A: Same thing. You know, being union, the way I am, I don't have a high opinion of central administration. Even if we had a good superintendent, the people who were under him just -- they were earning a buck. And that was about it. If I had to make a choice, you know, the principle for his or her management style would be the best assistance for teachers. And the best central administration could do was to get books and supplies to the schools, if they had the money and the desire.

Q: Do you remember when the HOPE Campaign came into the School Board?

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: Did they have any agenda or plan that you thought was worthwhile keeping?

A: I think that group was about as phony a group as you could get. No, they didn't to be specific. They would say things that were popular and made sense; they just didn't do it. "We've got to involve the community. We've got to have Community Councils," and all of that stuff. Well, hell, we had those before. They were called something

else, I guess. But like all communities, it depends on the desire of the parents --

END OF AUDIO FILE - PART 1

A: -- to get involved in the schools. Again half -- the middle school and junior high school up the street here -- you know, this area had good schools, because of the quality of the parents. Hutchins, where I started teaching, didn't have high student achievement, because of the lack of quality of the parents. And it wasn't because they didn't care, but, the parents were uneducated, probably had to work hard, and so there wasn't much they could give or do for their students. They expected the schools to do that. And again, the good parents, in my mind, were those who would support you in discipline, but they couldn't do much for you education-wise, or curriculum-wise, because they just didn't have it. Many of them were not high-school graduates.

Q: Do you think that the Annenberg Challenge contributed to Detroit?

A: What's the Annenberg --

Q: The Annenberg -- it was a grant of five to ten million dollars to Detroit for education reform...

A: I don't remember it, to tell you the truth. Probably, like so many other of those special funds -- many of them never got down to the classroom, or they got there in minute quantities.

Q: OK, why don't we shift a little bit? Let's talk about AFT. Do you remember when you first went to an AFT convention?

A: Lord knows. It was, I assume, back in the '60s. But I don't really remember, other than -- I frankly consider most conventions to be a waste of time.

Q: You joined the Black Caucus, though?

A: I don't think I did... Well, let me explain. You go to a convention, and all you get are goddamned speeches. You might have a committee meeting where you make a nice-sounding decision, but was it ever really executed in the local school districts? Rarely, I think. At least not in Detroit. But conventions are nothing but talk.

Q: A lot of talking.

A: Yeah, a lot of talk, and a lot of expenditure of union funds that would probably be better used at the local level.

Q: And you were also a member of the AFT Executive Council?

A: Yeah.

Q: 1982, starting?

A: Yeah, well, I'm from one of the bigger school districts. It's just a natural thing.

Q: And AFT makes sure that the bigger school districts are well represented?

A: Well, if you were AFT president and you want the vote to stay president, or to become president, at the convention, so you always court the delegates -- or the union, the local union -- that has the biggest vote at a convention. It's just natural politics.

Q: Do you think it would be different if there were a secret ballot, instead of the open ballot?

A: I don't think so. And the reason I don't is, the average delegate doesn't know anything about the national anywhere, and knows damn little -- so they will take -- at least in my experience -- they will take the recommendation of their leader, which is the president of their union or the chief delegate.

Q: What were some of your memories on serving for AFT council?

A: Not a heck of a lot, to be honest. We would go; we would listen; we would vote. We had good intentions, I'm not saying that -- but in education, one of the things you learn -- -- not too long after the fact -- that there are fads and styles. So if you get Lyndon Johnson with one theory of education, Kennedy with another, and Lord knows

who else, that was what was the practice, largely because it brought money to the district. Whether it was successful or not, I suspect, was questionable.

Q: OK. do you remember your trips to Africa?

A: Oh, yeah, I remember them well.

Q: Ghana and Nigeria -- why did you go to Ghana and Nigeria?

A: I think it was some kind of union function, wasn't it? Let's see... I know there were a couple of union conventions in Africa.

Q: And that's with the Education International?

A: I don't think so. Anyway, there were a couple of union conventions in Africa at some point. I know, because I was on the AFL-CIO executive board here in Detroit -- I think that was what I went to South Africa for. Basically, we went because, hey, we wanted to go there. "What's the old homeland like?" (laughter) Not too much different from here, really. The poor were just a little poorer, that's all. But some of that stuff up there is from African.

Q: And did you talk about union democracy or unionism in Africa, to try to...?

A: Yeah, we talked about it. (laughter) But Africa is a different world from here. Hey, a few well-off people rule there. And "poor" is poorer than here.

Q: You mentioned Snead. And I remember reading that Snead was -- Superintendent Snead -- he got voters to pass a millage for construction on schools, with no plan.

A: Yeah, well --

Q: Was there anything that -- could you kind of explain what happened there?

A: Well, you said it. (laughter) There was no plan. Look, I have to say one thing about Detroiters. Detroiters, as a whole, have always supported education. You cannot find anything that Detroiters were asked to vote on that was supportive of schools that they didn't support, that they didn't vote for. And so Snead took office and asked for a certain amount of money to improve the schools -- improve the physical characteristics of the schools -- and he got it. (laughter) Don't ask me how. He didn't have any plans! I don't know what happened specifically, now, because I just don't recall, but most of that money either went to waste or it never spent it.

Well, let me say this about Snead. Snead didn't know how to be Superintendent. That was his biggest failure. He was a principal; he was one of those principals that either he just coasted through the job, or he gave orders, they were followed. And you don't do that as a superintendent.

As a superintendent, the first thing you've got to deal with is the Board of Education. And you could have some nice people, you could have some sons-of-a-bitches, on those Boards of Education. So you'd have to stroke them. You'd have to sit down and talk to them, and all of that good stuff. I don't think Snead knew how to do that. He was the principal of Cass Tech, which is arguably the best school in the city, -- it still is, for that matter. And so, Snead issued an order at Cass, it was followed. And because the students at Cass were from some of the better and most educationally supportive families in the city, whatever the parents wanted, the parents at Cass got. They were better off economically. They were usually city leaders of some kind.

And the school district, in those days, depended on support of the citizenry -- for millage, for example. Any research will show you, when it came to vote on school funding, damn few people voted. And it was usually neighborhoods like this one, where most people have an education and some dollars, and in the poor neighborhoods they just didn't vote for…They didn't vote on anything, hardly. (laughter) So you had to keep your middle class happy. And since most

of the School Board members were from the middle class, they wanted to be stroked. Snead didn't understand that.

Q: All right, just a couple of wrap-up things.

A: Sure, sure.

Q: You started out with the DFT very early, when it was first getting there, and you left when it was nice and mature. Can you kind of explain -- can you tell us, where do you think the DFT's going?

A: Now?

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, I don't think it's going much of anywhere. It's about as far as it can get. The DFT is still involved -- not to the extent they were -- in city politics. Unfortunately -- and this is a criticism -- my successor, Janet Garrison, just doesn't communicate or get involved with the community.

When I was president, I was active in the 14th Congressional District, and I was on the board -- at one point, I was even President, or whatever the title was. I would go to community meetings. I had a -- we had a coalition of unions, and my logic behind that was that even though the teacher's union is the union that is listened to and respected and all of that good stuff, if you want city-

wide support you have to have people out in those communities speaking for you. Teachers don't live all over the city. At one time, I could identify within a few blocks where teachers lived. You've got sections of the East Side where no damn teachers live! So, therefore, you wanted something like the custodians, the secretaries, a few others, who live there and might have had some voice in the community and might have been able to get people out to vote or whatever was necessary.

I could do it here, but unless I got some solid support from the newspapers or something, the people in certain parts of the East Side just didn't give a damn. So you wanted the custodians and the secretaries and the paraprofessionals out there talking it up for you. Not to mention that they lived in these communities. And so -- you wanted -- I wanted -- citywide support. And citywide support meant getting the right people to talk for you. And that's not happening now. I had a coalition of unions, of all of the unions that represented employees. We would meet regularly, usually monthly, to make policy decisions. And I assume those folks went out and talked it up in their communities, or talked it up to their members. Whereas that's not happening now.

Q: Where do you see the future of the union movement here in Detroit, as well as Michigan?

A: I don't think there's a problem. The UAW's in trouble because the units they represent are moving out, or the Japanese are taking over. But even they are getting into government representation, because they are losing members. I mean, the UAW's -- they've got half the membership that they had a few years back. And still going downhill.

So I think the future of unionism in everything except industry is in good shape. Because, well, we're used to it. People are used to the unions negotiating for them, speaking up for them. The elected officials want the unions behind them, to get them reelected and to get the tax bills passed, and stuff like that. Politicians want union support at elections. Whether they're state legislature, mayor, City Council, you name it, they recognize that unions are important when it comes to turning out folks to vote.

Q: All right, last question, and then we're done. Looking back on your career as a teacher, as a union leader, what do you look back at and laugh at?

A: (laughter) I don't think about it very much, to tell you the truth. I thought I have a pretty good record of

representing the members. And by representing the members I mean more than just union-wise or grievance-wise or contract-wise, although that was good too -- but, some unions have had to recognize that when you go out into the world -- to Lansing, to community meetings -- which I did -- you are the image of the union that most of these people pick up. I mean, hell, even the reporters in the *News* and *Free Press*, you have to court them. Their owners may be bastards, but a reporter can write an article that makes you look good, or they can write an article that makes you look bad. A simple quote of the wrong kind can create a poor image. So yes, I would court Ron Russell and some of the other reporters from the *News* and *Free Press* -- and even though their owners or their editor might be a son-of-a-bitch -- excuse my French -- they could sneak in a word -- "John Elliot said," you know, that kind of stuff -- that made you look better than you would otherwise. You have to -- you just have to get down to the basic people. And let's just face it, newspapers are in business to make money. And even the publisher doesn't want to offend union members, because, educated people, by and large, are the biggest subscribers to newspapers. So I think unions are in good shape, as long as they know how to handle themselves, don't get overly arrogant or overbearing or

over-demanding. And, this being a union town, it's a lot easier than some other places.

Q: Excellent. Thank you. All right.

Q2: The first question is, at the time you became a teacher, did you face obstacles being a black male in a profession predominated by white females?

A: No. The reason I didn't was, number one, I went to an all-black school. Now, I'm sure a large number of the staff were white. But many of them couldn't control the kids in my first school -- that was Hutchins Junior High School. It was what you call a "factory neighborhood." And so, no, I never had a problem. Hutchins probably had more males -- not necessarily black; I don't remember -- than the average school, because the people in Personnel wanted that, because let's just say they believed that the males had more control over the kids than, you know -- again, the school I worked in later on, up on Livernois and Seven Mile -- than Hampton.

Q2: And when you first started working with the union, what was the racial climate of the city like?

A: Good question. I'm not sure that I knew or paid any attention to it. In the educational system, it was pretty good. I guess one of the factors would be, the schools were pretty much, overall, segregated. You had Hutchins,

which was majority-black students. I don't remember what the staff was, but they probably had more whites than blacks. You had Miller, which at one point was probably the only majority-black school. Well, Northern is one. Face it, this was a pretty segregated city at one time, and so I'm sure that the superintendent and the staff saw to it that the schools were segregated too. And any black teacher who wanted to go and stay at a black school was going to do that. The rule, was when you were a student teacher -- not a student teacher -- when you were a new teacher, probationary teacher, you stayed a certain amount of time -- two years -- and then you went elsewhere. Well, that didn't always happen. I stayed at Hutchins longer than two years, and when I went to Hampton I had used up any credits that I had to stay at Hutchins.

Q2: Now, can you tell us about the beginning with the first position, and the various positions you held in the Detroit Federation of Teachers?

A: Well, what's first was the Executive Board, if that's what you're talking about.

Q2: How did you get elected -- did they elect the Executive Board, or --

A: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q2: How were you able to get elected to the Executive Board just starting out with the union?

A: Well, you have to keep in mind, number one -- the union at that time was a white female-controlled organization. Mary Ellen Riordan was the president, and had been the president for God-knows-how-long. When I came in, she was the president, and what Mary Ellen Riordan said went. And so Mary Ellen and Helen Bowers ran the union. And I'm quite sure -- when I got in, I started helping Mary Ellen and Helen out. You know, taking union responsibility. And since it was probably -- and you'd have to ask her -- it was recognized that blacks were growing as a factor in the city, or starting to, or would be, I don't know -- and so Mary Ellen put me into responsible positions of one kind or another, committee chair or on the Executive Board. And eventually I just -- I gained some credibility on my own, but without her support, I wouldn't have gotten it.

Q2: And which work stoppage under your leadership as DFT President was your most memorable?

A: (laughter) Oh, they're all -- hell, I don't honestly know. There was one there where the school system was claiming they didn't have any money, and we were able to prove that they were lying. And we did that because -- patting myself on the back -- I was smart enough to hire a guy who had

extensive knowledge of finance, and this soon became my financial expert on Board of Education finance -- he's still down there.

Q2: Pat?

A: Pat Falcusan. Pat was a real rookie at one time, but he -- he had that natural sense of finance. And even though he might not have known much about the school board, or the school system, or the school system's finances, it just came to him. And of course I saw to it that he was fed information. And one of the good things about the collective bargaining law was that the school system had to give us information about their finances. They couldn't just say no. Not to mention that we had a couple of superintendents that didn't mind anyway.

Q2: And during your years of service -- which people were most influential in helping you during your years of service? Do you remember?

A: Oh, boy, that's a hard one. I can't recall, other than the few people that ran against me, like this fool Steve Conn. We were -- the union was never badly split. And basically, as this is just the way it was, if I could keep the female members of the system happy, I had support. I don't know what it is -- you tell me -- but women, by and large, don't want to get deeply involved in stuff like unions or outside

of work. I don't know if you saw the pictures in there, but there were instances where, you know, I'd be the only male in a group of people. (laughter) And so I guess that was just the way it was.

Q2: And what was your most outstanding moment as Detroit Federation of Teachers President.

A: I don't know. There were just too many good ones. If I had to pick something, I would say it was going out into the community and convincing the community that the school system needed a millage and the teachers were not going to abuse the money that should have been used in the classroom. Other than that, I would say, it's getting all of the unions to work together for the school system, not just for the unions themselves. Which you would have to do if you wanted to stay in office, but -- again, we'd go out; we'd convince people that this is good for the school system, that it's good for the employees.

Q2: If you had to do it all over again, would you? And what would you have done differently?

A: I can't think of anything. I thought at the time I was doing what was right. I very seldom failed. I believe, number one, in a system like this, you have to get community support. I think I did that more often than not. I think, as an employee leader, you have to have strong

internal knowledge about the system, particularly as finances -- (laughter) seems like finances controls everything. So that's why I hired Pat Falcusan. And I had some people before that, or I did it myself, depending. But you just have to take steps that you believe are good for the system and not harmful to the union.

Q2: And what message would you have to present members of the Detroit Federation of Teachers?

A: Stick with the community. Stick together as union members -- not stick together with just the members of the DFT, but with the other unions. I don't think that's happening now, and I think that's a mistake. We just live in the same communities, and so you need people speaking up, or saying good things about you.

Q2: And what is your message to Building Representatives of the Detroit Federation of Teachers?

A: Well, I guess the same thing I said, other than, make sure you represent your members and do it right. Building Reps have to get the union line out to the members in the building. They have to assist the members with problems that they have with the administration, or straighten them out if they're wrong, which happens. There are people who think that they ought to have their way, and they're not always right.

Q2: Thanks; that's all the time we have.

A: OK.

End - John Elliott Interview